

MODERN ENGLISH IDIOMS (1)

— Noun-Centered Expressions —

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1. Foreword

Language changes in terms of phonological, structural and vocabulary features, English being no exception, of which the most drastic and conspicuous change is probably to be observed of vocabulary items and idiomatic usage of the language, covering a more profound and extensive sphere of verbal expression than that of mere word and phrase structure hierarchy.

Idioms are the flesh and bones of each and every language ever spoken on earth, in that they do reflect the making-up process of any particular language, as well as its speakers' national and racial traits and characteristics—emotional, spiritual, and quite often, intellectual. They also graphically bespeak the social settings and environments with their effects, either favorable or unfavorable, upon the people and the language alike in the undercurrent of historical development. This is all the more true in the present century because of the ever and tremendously-expanding vocabulary of languages it has seen accompanying the remarkable progress which science has been achieving during the last few decades.

'It (English language) is particularly rich in idiomatic expressions. Under idiom, we include peculiar uses of particular words, and also particular phrases or turns of expression which, from long usage, have become stereotyped in English....'

'It is the idiomatic part of a language that is the most difficult part for a foreigner to master. It adds to the difficulty that often no reason can now be given as to how or why a particular idiomatic phrase has assumed its present form.'¹

Dictionaries may very well attempt to provide as up-to-date information as they possibly can on vocabulary of a language or languages by means of defining each vocabulary item as it is used at various levels of speech. The furnished information is therefore derived out of diverse sources which cover as many spheres of human activity as can be imagined—social, economical, scientific, military, etc. Despite the efforts on the part of dictionary-makers, however, dictionaries, it appears, are hardly one hundred percent relevantly up-to-date, inevitably burdened with the almost

impossible task of keeping track of from-day-to-day language change which never ceases. It is also to be noticed that dictionary compilers usually take their deliberate time studying the particular usage of a particular item before they judge and adopt it as properly accepted, so that by the time a dictionary is off the press, some part of it is of necessity, strictly speaking, out-of-date, having already lost its fresh savor, thus not unfrequently with the result that, much to our regret, a number of obsolete expressions still unduly detain their places in the dictionary in question.

‘Idiomatic expressions are to be found in the daily speech of English people.... Likewise on the radio, in novels, newspapers and magazine articles, and books of travel, idiomatic turns of expression abound....’

‘In learning English idioms, therefore, the student should carefully study good modern authors, and books of travel, idiomatic peculiarities.’²

This is one of the reasons why a number of specimens have been recorded here of such popular authors as Micky Spillane, for instance, who employs a very colloquial form of the language. This paper attempts to study and present some such idiomatic expressions as have come to the notice of the author as he read and examined American and British literary works, fiction or non-fiction. Attention is exclusively concentrated upon noun-centered structures. Japanese equivalents are given which the author hopes may interest the reader. Specimens are roughly arranged in the alphabetical order of the stem nouns of the listed structures.

2. Metaphors and Similes

2.1 Animal Expressions

‘Cabs were disgorging the pompous and the famous like sick *cats*.’³

A sick cat vomits usually without a letup until she is completely relieved.

‘...a *dog-eared* Manhattan phone book covered with dust.’⁴

This expression, synonymous with ‘rabbit-eared’, may be difficult for the Japanese to associate with dogs of Japanese breed with erect ears.

‘The *duck* she was with was a Charlie Chan type.’⁵

The Japanese *kamo* is the exact counterpart of the above, but the English ‘pigeon’ is also known.

'You're as out of a place as a *hat on a horse*.'⁶

Even a horse, however, may wear a hat in a very hot weather to prevent sunstroke.

'I'll close the door *after the horse is stolen*.'⁷

'...was not a case of shutting the stable door after the *horse* had bolted.'⁸

The Japanese expression *ato no matsuri* is referred to in association with the above-quoted.

"'You make quite a figure in that tux.'"

"'Only ~~I~~for you. I'm not a *clothes horse*.'"'⁹

A *clothes horse* is not a real horse, but it means just what it is.

2.2 Physically-Associated Expressions

'They're like you...political *behind kissers* with the guts of a *bug*!'¹⁰

An '*ass-kisser*' is also another popular, although more indecent, version. The '*guts of a bug*' belongs to 2.1, its Japanese counterpart meaning quite to the contrary.

'We began to move cautiously forward, headlight poking *fingers* of light into the mist and fog.'¹¹

Very picturesque description.

'One ran for state senator...and lost *by a hair*.'¹²

'She stood there beside me in the morgue looking down at the man she used to be married to and never *turned a hair*.'¹³

Japanese uses a 'sheet of paper' for the former, whereas *kan-ippatsu* (meaning *by a hair*) is used under different circumstances, and an 'eyebrow' for the latter.

'A guy about a *half head* shorter than she was...'¹⁴

'O'Conner would *rub his hands* together.'¹⁵

'When he did (saw me) he went a little *white around the nostrils*, and he couldn't seem to take his eyes off my face.'¹⁶

'There was *white around his nostrils* and his mouth was a fine red line of hate.'¹⁷

Japanese has similar expressions with slightly different connotation.

'The owner tried to *palm off* leftovers from the previous day.'¹⁸

'He let his hands drop helplessly by his sides, then turned them *palms up* in despair.'¹⁹

'*Palm off*' is a verb, while '*palms up*' an adverb here.

'The girl was a lovely kid in an *off-the-shoulder* Mexican blouse.'²⁰

'The Complete Sherlock Holmes Stories *rubbed shoulders with* Hakal, The All Blacks Story, etc.'²¹

'*Pinch my skin* to see if I am (awake) or not...'²²

A Japanese would *pinch his cheeks* instead of his mere *skin*.

2.3 Monetary Expressions

'He reached out and picked up my *C note* and looked at it carefully.'²³

A *C note* is a one-hundred dollar bill, and is not very often witnessed.

'Here, they're *a dime a dozen*.'²⁴

Very cheap in quality also.

'He spun and fell *on a dime*, and I missed the 4.5 for the third time in twenty years.'²⁵

'*On a dime*' means 'instantly'.

'He would give odds that this joker was as queer as a *three-dollar bill*.'²⁶

A *three-dollar bill* is certainly very queer and extinct.

2.4 Apparel Expressions

'When the man in the *boiler suit* has finished with the doors...' ²⁷

A 'boiler suit' is a kind of overall, *enkan-fuku* in Japanese.

'I showered and changed into a *city suit*.' ²⁸

There are a business suit, a dress suit, and a sport suit in this connection.

'She wore a *size dress* that matched her age.' ²⁹

A '*size dress*' is a ready-made dress, also called a *dress off the rack*.

'...Some kids taunted him for wearing *hand-me-down clothes*.' ³⁰

which are usually not quite new.

'If his name was Monica, I'd *eat my hat*.' ³¹

The last expression is not an uncommon expression.

'My cautious *belt-and-braces* philosophy paid a dividend.' ³²

A precaution to prevent your enemy getting you *with your pants down*.

2.5 Contrastive Expressions

'Today's *friend* is tomorrow's *enemy*.' ³³

The Japanese counterpart is exactly to the contrary: *Today's enemy is tomorrow's friend*. Whence the difference?

'Whether he keeps the other six *finger* nails and his *thumb* nails is entirely up to you.' ³⁴

'It was a career that was more than a *profession*; it was a *calling*.' ³⁵

'He also wears *spectacles*—not *glasses*—and has a thin nose.' ³⁶

'*Pots* calling *kettles*' ³⁷

The Japanese equivalent is '*Me-kuso hana-kuso wo warau*.'

2.6 Proverbial Expressions

*'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.'*³⁸

The *'ounce of prevention'* is as precious as the proverbial *'stitch in time.'*

*'That's water over the falls now and I just don't give a damn about it any more.'*³⁹

2.7 International Expressions

*'When they see this thing laid across the papers they'll do a mass Dutch act.'*⁴⁰

'"Where to?" I asked.

*"Over to Brooklyn Bridge. A girl pulled the Dutch act."*⁴¹

*'The farewell note said she was just tired of it all, life was a bore and she was getting no place, thus the Dutch act.'*⁴²

*'If the worse comes to the worse we can always blow up a whole lot of french letters and float ourselves off that way.'*⁴³

It is not very surprising that people should often ascribe what they find undesirable to other nationalities.

3. Single-Word Noun Idioms

*'She sat down with a sigh, using me as a breather between courses.'*⁴⁴

*'The lobby of the hotel was small, but crowded with a lot of faces taking a breather from the weather outside.'*⁴⁵

*'You hold up that gold shield in front of me like a limp carrot.'*⁴⁶

*'Fenton had just purchased a top floor condominium, close enough to the ocean to lean over the balcony and look down to watch the surf breaking.'*⁴⁷

The Japanese equivalent would be *danchi*.

*'He did his best to make a copycat dive on the nearest balloon.'*⁴⁸

This partially belongs to 2.1. A Japanese would say *copymonkey* instead of *copycat*.

“What number was it?”

“Two-oh-two-oh-two. It rhymed.”

“Good. You remember the *exchange*?”’⁴⁹

‘I gave him the number and asked for a listing of all *exchanges* that carried the number and the names to go with them.’⁵⁰

Exchange here means *kyokuban* in Japanese.

‘They had a *five-figure* annual income.’⁵¹

Ten thousand, for instance, is a five-figure number.

‘When I put *feelers* on him they all came back negative.’⁵²

To *put feelers on* somebody means to investigate.

‘The guy had a *phobia* about effeminate names and changed it some place along the line.’⁵³

Phobia is usually adopted as suffix.

‘Everyone who lives here is a *regular*. No *overnighters*.’⁵⁴

Joren and *furi* are well used Japanese slangs.

‘So far we have over three hundred names with *repeats* on about half.’⁵⁵

‘If I get any flak from him, he doesn’t get his *severance*.’⁵⁶

Severance here means severance pay.

‘Surgery makes great *strides* during a war or in time of necessity.’⁵⁷

Progress or improvement is meant by *stride*.

“‘You *scumbag*.’ It meant a condom.’⁵⁸

“‘What’s the going rate with them?’”

“The *sky*’s the limit.”’⁵⁹

Japanese has an expression: *tenjo shirazu*.

'One was an adventure novel and the other a technical *travelogue*.'⁶⁰

'...a *voyeur* might avidly watch a sexual act being performed in front of him.'⁶¹

Self-evident.

'One book opened and another fell out of the *well* that had been cut into the pages.'⁶²

'Give'em *what-for*. I was here all through the Blitz.'⁶³

4. Noun-Compound and Noun-Centered Idioms

'It occurred to me in one of those *delayed-action double takes* that the black limousine might appear once more.'⁶⁴

'Then, compounding the problem, there had been the maintenance crew's *work-to-rule campaign*.'⁶⁵

Work-to-rule campaign is in Japanese *jumppo undo*.

'It was considered a "*career path*" toward a detective's gold shield.'⁶⁶

'The type who read and reread every word on the Playboy *center spread*.'⁶⁷

This is what is called *orikomi* or *tojikomi* in Japanese.

'He had broken the *unwritten code* that...said a cop could not turn in other cops.'⁶⁸

The same is referred to as an *unwritten law*.

'So my *comfort quotient* remained at about the same level, low but not unbearable.'⁶⁹

The Japanese translation would mean 'discomfort quotient.'

'Two days after a working script is done, *pirated copies* will be peddled around town.'⁷⁰

'I put a *credit card call* through to London.'⁷¹

This is something yet to be introduced to Japan.

'The anger receded and it was like losing her *outer defenses*.'⁷²

Outer defenses are what the Japanese call *soto-bori*.

'The *elevator pointer* was the bottom floor, the basement.'⁷³

'You'd better use the *self-service elevator*.'⁷⁴

'...first-class ticket holders, important-appearing men, ninety per cent of whom Shayne knew must be travelling *on expenses accounts*..., or else they'd be in the cheaper rear section.'⁷⁵

The so-called *shayo-zoku* in Japanese are those who love to be on expenses accounts.

'The *farewell note* said she was just tired of it all, life was a bore.'⁷⁶

This is what the Japanese call 'kakioki'.

'"You check the orchestra?"

"Sure, two *fill-ins* for a couple who couldn't make it."'⁷⁷

'I guess I got a *father image*. I got to take care of you.'⁷⁸

'A firm of contractors gave the building a *face-lift* every three years, and it was said that after they had washed the grime off the windows, you could really see the National Gallery across the square.'⁷⁹

This would be what is called *kesho-naoshi* in Japanese.

'Somebody's laid *groundwork* for them here, so they have a contract.'⁸⁰

Japanese has similar expressions: *ji-narashi* and *ne-mawashi*.

'...in a fairly new modern house that...could have been lifted bodily from any U.S. *housing development*.'⁸¹

Danchi is a popular equivalent to the above. (*cf. condominium*)

'I couldn't pick up the medical history.'⁸²

'I told them to meet me beside the *honey wagon* in five minutes, circled the trailers and wardrobe truck.'⁸³

A *honey wagon* here means a mobile restroom, while it also refers to a honey cart carrying honey buckets in old Japan.

'In the suburban *tract houses* with tiny, neatly trimmed lawns, where most of the city policemen lived...'⁸⁴

Which had been constructed on a *housing development*.

'A check on the *back issues* of any papers can verify this.'⁸⁵

A *back number* refers to the same.

'You're angling for the *Jack-the-Ripper* bit, aren't you? '⁸⁶

Which is also recognized in Japan with horror and abhorrence, called in Japanese *kamisori-ma*.

'Diana...glanced at the *June-and-September couple* by the rail.'⁸⁷

This couple is formed when a twenty-year-old girl and a sixty-year-old gentleman are united in matrimony, or *vice versa*.

'The apartment consisted of an *eat-in kitchen*, a living room....'⁸⁸

'The guy in the store thought I just had a cold and fed me *hot lemonade* and aspirin, and wouldn't let me go outside until I felt better.'⁸⁹

What do Japanese people take to cure a cold?

'The *cost of living index* has gone up *on all fronts*.'⁹⁰

This is just what is happening nowadays much to the harassment of people.

'You forget there was a *Lollipop Lady* on duty to see the kids across the road.'⁹¹

A *Midori-no-Obasan* is also a familiar figure in Japan.

'Tennant guessed that there was *little love lost* between the press and televi-

sion.'⁹²

'I told you Brouhin sells *in bulk*. He was offering a *package deal*.'⁹³

'There was even a recognized *pecking order*; Donald first, followed by Tom, followed by Chief....'⁹⁴

This is what is called in Japanese: *joretsu*.

'No matter what he does, he can only be considered *persona non grata* and returned to Russia.'⁹⁵

'...those pursuing *the world's oldest profession* along the street and an occasional call girl working limited operations...'⁹⁶

'Middle class *owner-occupancy*.'⁹⁷

'Mochiya' is the Japanese for the above.

'What's the *asking price*? '⁹⁸

The Japanese say '*Ii-ne*'.

'*Price-fixing arrangements* are found to have been worked out in violation of the anti-trust laws.'⁹⁹

The above is self-evident.

'...standing among the *pockets of people* looking down the street at the approaching motorcade, the technician glanced to his left.'¹⁰⁰

'Those who because of their years and junior rank had deliberately seated themselves *below the salt*.'¹⁰¹

'Both of them dropped the charges after an *out-of-court settlement*.'¹⁰²

This is what is called *jidān* in Japanese.

'You must stay away from the telephone, because I don't want to hear an *engaged signal* when I come back to you.'¹⁰³

'The guy in the parking lot had very thoughtfully put the *skid chain* on my

buggy and earned himself a couple of bucks.’¹⁰⁴

A *skid chain* is indispensable to driving in the snow and ice.

‘The missus is a *light sleeper*. He waved me to a kitchen chair after closing the bedroom door softly.’¹⁰⁵

‘Framed original photos of models in everything from nylon *step-ins* to low slung convertibles.’¹⁰⁶

‘I wanted to tell her I could charge *stud fees*, but I didn’t.’¹⁰⁷

‘“I scrounged the original clearance on her if you wanted to see it.”
“*No sweat.*”’¹⁰⁸

Such a response is not quite unusual.

‘He...was tanned to the neck, but otherwise he was...a *sun-dodger*.’¹⁰⁹

‘Anything in here of *sentimental value*’¹¹⁰

Old folks frequently keep things merely for *sentimental value*.

‘That’s why we’re here alone, so that, if you do feel like talking *out of school*, it’ll just be your word against mine.’¹¹¹

‘If there were any *swing vote* left, they’d damn well go to his side.’¹¹²

Fudo-hyo is the Japanese translation.

‘He started north *at a fast walk*.’¹¹³

‘His hair thinning back from a *widow’s peak*...’¹¹⁴

This is an awful way to get bald.

5. Verb-plus-Noun Idioms

‘I *took a last drag on* the butt.’¹¹⁵

‘“I haven’t decided yet. I’m *walking the fence*.”

“Any preference which way you want to jump?”’¹¹⁶

'She *crooked a finger* at me.

"Breakfast is served, my lord." '117

'Carr had never killed anything in his life—he'd never even *cleaned a fish*.' 118

The Japanese counterpart is 'not to kill an insect'—*mushi mo korosanu*.

"Can I use the phone?"

"Be my guest." '119

'I *felt like a heel*.... I felt like I was crawling up out of a sewer somewhere.' 120

'Six men lost their sleep, three lost their dates, and one *caught hell* from his wife.' 121

That is to say his wife raised hell.

'He's a good citizen with nothing down on him. Votes regular, *sits jury duty*, attends P.T.A.' 122

'Let them know that politics are *going to pot*.' 123

Pot means a large sum of money here. Politics seems to be just the same everywhere.

'It was a rooftop game that could end when he wanted to *call it quits*.' 124

"Let's *call it a day*," he said. "I'm going to be late for dinner as it is." '125

'I walked toward a cabstand to be ready to *call it a night*.' 126

The last three specimens mean to *quit*.

'She *made her rounds* of formal cheek-kissing and handshaking.' 127

'Her aim, she explained, was to *give utmost value for money spent*.' 128

'He *worked his way through school* and became a criminal-law lawyer.' 129

"Colonel, if you need to *take a leak*, now's a good time. We're going down pretty fast."

Goodman nodded.... A full bladder during a night bombing run could get pretty

hairy.'¹⁸⁰

6. Conclusion

It is pointed out with good reason that :

'He (a dictionary compiler) must beware of hasty generalization.'¹⁸¹

The specimens hereby presented, however, may point to a general direction, vague as it may be, of change or evolution which the language in question is taking. The quotations have therefore been given in the hope that they furnish firsthand as relevant information as possible of modern English usage, irrespective of British or American English, for

'Usages that to-day are peculiar to America are tomorrow adopted by English writers and speakers.'¹⁸²

There is a marked tendency toward 'part of speech' shift as is observed, for instance, in the specimen #130 where the word *leak* is used as a noun, although nouns are often used in the capacity of a verb as Horwill discusses :

'It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that an American writer never hesitates to turn a noun into a verb if it will serve his purpose.'¹⁸³

A large body of nouns are also used as adjective as in *home stay* (cf. stay at home), frequently deleting a preposition and shortening words, which is one of the modern characteristics of language change.¹⁸⁴

The writer agrees with Horwill who asserts that :

The present volume (i.e. *A Dictionary of MODERN AMERICAN USAGE*) is not based upon other dictionaries but upon material I have collected independently during more than thirty years.... As far as possible I have illustrated my account of American usages by examples I have myself met with—none of my quotations are at secondhand.'¹⁸⁵

'Students greatly need to be warned against books which profess to interpret English dictions and which have been compiled by men whose mother tongue is not English. We gladly acknowledge that many have so learnt English as to be able to speak and write it well and fluently; yet it must be admitted that few such could write an ordinary letter or essay without betraying some ignorance of English idiom.'¹⁸⁶

It is without difficulty to see how closely the above-quoted statement applies to the way average Japanese students utilize English language. Such warning concerning the study of idioms is helpful to the more effective teaching and study of the language; we are in sheer need of more information about English as it is spoken and written by native speakers *today*, in order to achieve still better communication with the whole world, not to mention the English speaking nations alone.

(To Be Continued)

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